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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001868

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: BABANGIDA POSITIONING FOR 2007 ELECTIONS

REF: A. A) ABUJA 1496

[B](#). B) ABUJA 1636

CLASSIFIED BY CDA ROGER MEECE FOR REASONS 1.5 (B & D).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: While he had been seen by some as a potential challenger for the 2003 elections, former military Head-of-State Ibrahim Babangida (IBB) faded during the party conventions. Apparently he is now maneuvering for a political comeback in 2007, and "IBB For President" organizations are springing up throughout the South-West. IBB will rely on his contacts in the military, political and business communities for support, and appears to be manipulating the political process by furthering the distrust between the President and the Vice President. IBB's overarching concern, however, is protecting the billions of dollars he is believed to have salted away during his reign, and he remains concerned that President Obasanjo or others could attempt to confiscate the ill-gotten wealth. For now, IBB remains content to allow others to labor for him in the public arena while supporting rumored candidates such as NSA Aliyu Mohammed Gusau and former Lagos Governor Buba Marwa behind the scenes. IBB's tendency to take action only when certain to win, combined with his waning popularity and the emergence of competing interests among his followers, could trip up his efforts -- much as it did during the 2003 political party conventions. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) While seen by some as a potential challenger for the 2003 elections, former military Head-of-State Ibrahim Babangida faded during the party conventions. One of his assistants, however, told Poloff in March that his real plan had been to ensure a weak presidency in 2003 and block potential successors. By placing himself in position to stage a political comeback in 2007, IBB hoped to rehabilitate his image, tarnished by his failed transition program and Sani Abacha's ascension.

[1](#)3. (C) After the elections, many believe that IBB is actively promoting his own 2007 candidacy. Citing "IBB For President" organizations springing up throughout the South-West (home of MKO Abiola, the "winner" of the 1993 election annulled by IBB), some see the General's fingerprints. The August 27 ceremony launching a book about IBB by one of his close associates was also viewed as a campaign tactic, at least by potential challenger Muhammadu Buhari (Ref A). Buhari commented that it looked more like a campaign launch than a book launch and challenged IBB to "meet him" in 2007. According to another IBB advisor, IBB will continue to rely on his wide range of contacts in the military, political and business communities to manipulate the political process. The advisor claims IBB is behind ongoing problems between President Obasanjo and one of IBB's likely 2007 rivals, Vice President Atiku Abubakar. The wedding of IBB's daughter attracted a who's who of Nigerian politics, with most current and former politicians and military officers paying calls on IBB's Minna residence, including representatives of the Abiola and Abacha families and of both the President and Vice-President (Ref B).

[1](#)4. (C) COMMENT: While IBB consults with the President and is in frequent contact with the Vice-President, neither is his friend. IBB's overarching concern is protecting the billions of dollars he is believed to have salted away during his reign. IBB remains concerned that Obasanjo could attempt to confiscate the ill-gotten wealth, as the President has gone after the family of deceased former dictator Sani Abacha. END COMMENT.

FIGHT MANAGER

[1](#)5. (C) Vice President Atiku presents a challenge to IBB's desire to dominate the northern political arena. Even though most believe Atiku was unable to lure popular support in northern Nigeria away from opposition ANPP presidential candidate Buhari, the Vice President was able to control the ruling PDP party machinery and the security forces well enough to secure a majority of the vote in the North-East

region.

16. (C) IBB has suffered further setbacks from his attempts to stage-manage both the ruling PDP party convention and the opposition ANPP convention. Unlike his daughter's Minna fete, a crowd gathered for a wedding ceremony in Zaria physically assaulted IBB and National Security Advisor Aliyu Mohammed Gusau. Eyewitnesses report that IBB was forced to voice support for ANPP presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari and was lucky to be extracted without injury. It is widely believed that IBB maintains some element of control over more than one of the other, considerably smaller opposition parties, but he is rumored to have recently joined the PDP in an effort to further his political ambitions.

17. (C) For now, IBB remains content to allow others to labor for him in the public arena while remaining behind the scenes. Along with a number of South-West politicians coming out to support him, he is said to be the source of rumors that NSA Gusau and former Lagos State Military Administrator Mohammed Buba Marwa are interested in contesting the Presidential ticket in 2007. The two, both allies of IBB, have yet to confirm their intentions.

18. (C) It appears that IBB's real political efforts are currently devoted to creating an environment of confusion and attempting to weaken Obasanjo. While some think the President would support him in order to prevent Vice President Atiku from getting the 2007 nomination, IBB is not likely to depend solely on that support. It is also reported by some observers that IBB is pulling strings within the Judiciary to enable Buhari's election challenge to proceed. By stringing the tribunal out over several months, IBB likely hopes to keep the clouds over Obasanjo's second-term mandate and pull the rug from under Buhari at the last possible minute. (NOTE: Buhari and IBB together appointed 11 of the fifteen present Supreme Court justices. Abacha appointed one and Obasanjo has appointed three. END NOTE.)

BUT NOT A FIGHTER?

19. (C) IBB's plans could be hampered by several factors.

-- Buhari's strong and growing popularity will be difficult to derail. By promoting the Tribunal hearings of electoral malpractices, IBB is contributing to Buhari's popularity.

-- Money remains important in Nigerian politics, but Buhari's grassroots support is deep and not for sale. And to the extent IBB is seen as associated with Obasanjo, the President's continued alienation of other elements of Nigerian society could put these sections out of reach of even IBB's deep pockets.

-- While IBB retains a widespread loyalty (mostly from his largesse during and after his years as head of state), an increasing number of his acolytes are emerging as political players in their own right. While they will go with him up to a point, with IBB's waning popularity among Nigerians, these "IBB Boys" will likely discover that as men they have ambitions separate from their one-time leader.

IBB's tendencies to manipulate those already slugging it out in the ring, and to delay jumping in personally until certain of victory, could cause him to trip over the ropes much as he did during the 2003 political party conventions. Newer leaders may vault over him, and the present generation could try to ring the bell on him early. But given his political stamina and powerful financial punch, none of them should count him out.

MEECE